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SUBJECT The CIA and Honduras

CHUCK SCARBOROUGH: From Costa Rica, the President flew to Honduras, where, according to a report today in the New York Times, the CIA is engaged in its most ambitious political and paramilitary operation in nearly a decade: 150 agents helping Honduras overthrow the communist government of Nicaragua.

Well, Mr. Reagan today said he could not confirm nor deny that report. He couldn't confirm it, anyway -- and doubted if the New York Times could.

Andrea Mitchell has more.

ANDREA MITCHELL: Before arriving here, the President was asked about new reports that as many as 150 CIA operatives are in the country. He said he could not comment on anything that has to do with national security. But senior officials have said that the covert action is limited to hit-and-run raids designed to harass but not topple Nicaragua's Sandinista government. They've said Americans are not directly involved in fighting, but are providing money and support.

To downplay the military connection, joint military maneuvers that had been scheduled between the two countries were postponed until after this visit. American officials say they will take place soon.

The Administration has pointed to President Roberto Suazo Cordova's year-old civilian government as a showplace democracy. But many Hondurans believe otherwise, saying the military is still in charge.

The talks between the two leaders focused on economics,

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terrorism, and security.

The Prersident's final meeting was with Guatemalan President Rios Montt. The Administration is poised to resume military aid to Guatemala, which was suspended by President Carter in 1977. The Reagan White House believes Guatemala has improved its human rights record. And last night the President said the government of El Salvador has made great progress on human rights, enough to justify recertifying El Salvador for continued aid, as is required every six months. That is certain, though, to draw fire from Congress when the President gets home.

SCARBOROUGH: Honduras may be the last stop on the President's Latin American tour, but it is by no means the least important. As Fred Francis reports, Honduras is the cutting edge of the Administration's strategy to combat communist influence in Central America.

FRED FRANCIS: Honduras, where most of the people are poor and most of the children are hungry, is the centerpiece of the Reagan Administration's Latin American policy. Here, the American dollar is financing an army beyond Honduras's needs. And under cover of its jungles, the CIA has trained a guerrilla force to fight communism.

The Honduran Army received almost \$200 million in aid the past two years. No one is saying how much the CIA has spent.

As one Administration source explained it, Washington's policy is somewhat covert, but not complicated. First, Honduras will be built into a major military power in the region. Honduras will continue to quietly help El Salvador with its insurgency and serve as a role model for Guatemala. The three together will then be an influential force to somehow bring about a change in the Marxist government in Nicaragua.

The price for all that will be high. The price may also be high for Honduras's president, Roberto Suazo Cordova. Sources within Honduras say that Suazo Cordova would like more control over the army. The President senses that the people here are dissatisfied. The sources say the President realizes that military power will not feed his malnourished nation.

The economy is pathetic. There will be no growth this year. Unemployment is so high, the figures are impossible to calculate. Disease and starvation are the two main killers.

Rosa had a disease of the lungs. Her four-year-old heart had stopped and some rural nurses brought her back to life. We got her mother's permission to take her by private plane to a bigger city. But the hospital had no portable oxygen. And

before we could reach the plane, Rosa died.

No one knows how many children die from starvation. Seventy percent are malnourished. These eight are among the lucky ones able to sit in the sun, waiting for their noon meal. They are also fortunate because they have a Peace Corps worker to plan what they eat. Mary Kapriva is a nutritionist from Pocohontas, Iowa.

MARY KAPRIVA: And most of them just live to survive. It's a fact. You have to deal with it. A lot of these will go home and they will live on tortillas and rice and beans. And they need that milk, they need the fruits and vegetables.

FRANCIS: They only get those foods at the hospitals, and they get meat here.

KAPRIVA: There are projects that we need to start for meat, for example, for the rural people, projects dealing with rabbits and chicken. But we need money to start the projects first.

FRANCIS: Many of these children have never tasted meat. And after they leave this hospital, they may never taste it again. The country is just too poor. And right now, most of the money that comes from Washington is spent on guns.

SCARBOROUGH: Nicaragua, in a formal note of protest, said Honduran troops and rightist gunmen attacked its border positions yesterday. And this is just the latest fighting along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. This latest incident occurred on the eve of President Reagan's visit to Honduras.

Robin Lloyd reports from Nicaragua.

ROBIN LLOYD: This is Halapa, a remote Nicaraguan village deep in the mountains just a few miles from the border with Honduras. It is a town under siege, constantly threatened by anti-government guerrillas, allegedly backed by the CIA. It was last attacked two weeks ago.

Truckloads of troops are constantly on patrol. More than ten Nicaraguan soldiers have been killed in this area in the past few weeks, and more dead are expected. Most of the fighting goes on in the mountains above Halapa.

This Nicaraguan army patrol is returning home after 11 days. The soldiers saw combat three times. One was killed. They report that the anti-government forces, whom Nicaraguan officials call counterrevolutionaries, are armed with automatic rifles, machine guns, grenade and rocket launchers, most of the equipment U.S.-made.